
Although there has been a spate of books recently on animal-human relations and representations of animals, Wendy Woodward’s is the first to deal with animal representations in Southern African writing. General interest in the subject has probably been encouraged by J. M. Coetzee’s two works of fiction, *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*, both of which receive considerable attention in her book. Also contributing to her thesis are several non-fiction studies by anthropologists and naturalists, including studies of encounters with baboons, lions, leopards and elephants by, respectively, Barbara Smuts, Linda Tucker, Gillian van Houten and Katy Tucker, as well as the remarkable *The Soul of the Ape* and *My Friends the Baboons* by the Afrikaans writer Eugène Marais, published in the 1930s. Marais’s even more remarkable *The Soul of the White Ant* is not included, presumably because ants fall outside Woodward’s range of interest, her focus being on warm-blooded creatures. There is one chapter each on felines, baboons and whales, two on dogs, and one more general chapter on traditional African attitudes to cattle, horses and birds as they emerge in modern fiction and memoir.

Here, too, it is worth pointing out what Woodward’s study does not include: the representations of animals in pre-colonial rock art and orature. The oral tradition collected by nineteenth-century missionaries and others is populated by animals that act like people and people who bear the names of animals. Rock art also includes representations of therianthropes (part animal, part human). Given Woodward’s intense interest in the relations between humans and animals and what she calls ‘animal subjectivities’, as well as in the imagining of new discourses between humans and animals, it seems a pity that she did not include a study of representations from the pre-colonial past. For it is here that she might have found — or been closer to finding — what seems for her either insufficiently powerful or not very interestingly represented in the fiction she studies and towards which her philosophical and emotional interest continually drives her: not any nostalgic utopianism but complex suggestions of human-animal interactions, interactions in which humans are fundamentally changed through sustained animal companionship or through what may be moments of profound mutual recognition between human and animal.

Pre-colonial orature and art are deeply concerned with such altered states of consciousness. They also reveal a strong social interest in the importance of respect in human attitudes towards animals, albeit in a hunting culture. In contrast, the fiction Woodward addresses too often uses animals as bit-players, light relief or quite flat metaphors; and when the fiction does portray an animal to indicate an ecologically or philosophically more advanced vision, it seems to do so more fleetingly than her study requires. Even when the fictional works are in themselves rich and complex (Oliver Schreiner’s, J. M. Coetzee’s, Mia Couto’s, Marlene van Niekerk’s, Es’kia Mphahlele’s, most notably), their representations of human-animal relations do not seem to be sufficiently central or sustained to move Woodward’s thesis beyond the point the non-fiction has taken her. In some cases, they deny her thesis on animal subjectivity in ways that are not particularly productive. One’s overriding impression is that the book Woodward wanted to write was about how an improved understanding of animals might...
lead us to a better future, whereas – as an academic literary critic – she needed to base her study on a survey of the relevant imaginative literature that could not, after all, give full rein to her philosophical and ecological thesis.

Nonetheless, this is in many ways a compelling book. Woodward is particularly good at identifying when an imagined subjectivity is being attributed to animals in a self-serving way, exposing sentimentalising ideas of the wilderness and showing how humans – fictionalised or otherwise – have scant regard for animal suffering. Her book is unashamedly tendentious, intending primarily to contribute to ethical debates about the treatment of animals and to show how this treatment is symptomatic of a more general ecological malaise. In this regard the book contributes to philosophical debates about what Woodward calls subjective kinship, or the intersubjective relationship between human and nonhuman animals. In claiming a shared discourse between humans and animals, in using the term ‘subjectivity’ for animals, and in insisting that animals are not to be seen as entirely ‘other’, Woodward departs from Jacques Derrida, who argues in his essay ‘The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’ – translated and published in Critical Inquiry in 2002 – that while he is brought to a renewed consciousness of self under the gaze of a cat, the cat nonetheless remains an absolute other to him, a being with whose address he cannot himself engage. Derrida thus contradicts philosophical positions which claim animals lack language, consciousness and self-consciousness, but he maintains the existence of an abyssal rupture between human and animal. Between animals and humans lies the fact of a discourse fundamentally unshared: Derrida’s overriding interest is in the abyssal limit of the human in relation to the animal’s absolute alterity. Although Derrida goes so far as to argue that each animal is an irreplaceable living being, he does not use terms like ‘individuality’ and ‘subjectivity’ in relation to animals. This is because for Derrida these terms are discursive; they take their meaning from a history of signification inextricably relating to the language that humans speak, not the language that animals speak.

While I myself would be more wary of that term ‘subjectivity’ than Woodward is, and would also maintain that, for humans, animals represent an area of absolute alterity, I also believe that she usefully goes beyond the limits of Derrida’s study. His interest is primarily in what the animal gaze says about human consciousness, whereas hers is in what we can and need to learn about animal consciousness. If South African fiction has not given her quite the ground she needs, perhaps for her next book she might take her own dog as her subject – the dog whose eyes we see gazing out from the front cover of her book – whether in relation to existing literary representations of dogs or to current philosophical arguments about dogs, or both. In When Species Meet, Donna Haraway also takes issue with Derrida, not in asserting an animal subjectivity as such (she uses the word ‘subject’ quite sparingly, almost always followed by the preposition ‘to’ and the appropriate noun, as in ‘subject to someone’s authority’) but in claiming that if one looks closely at the companionship between humans and animals one can find not just a shared language but also the mutual creation of self. If the category ‘species’ seems a broad one here, so too does the category ‘animal’ as used in Woodward’s title, and future work would be profitably focused on the specificities within these broad categories, taking into account – just for one thing – the impact that their association with the human world may have on the different kinds of animals.

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